No. 47

The REDEMPTION of Marie Gordon

THE TRAGIC STORY OF WRONGED WOMANHOOD

Price 10¢

For over an hour he paced up and down in the library, trying to arrive at some sort of a conclusion. Somehow he could not bring himself to believe that Miss Desmond was Marie, his first wife.

R. of M. C., No. 47.

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WARNER took his departure somewhat reluctantly. Filled with strange forebodings he went about his work of directing the activities on the estate. At times he showed signs of great mental distress. His mind was not on his work.

But he did not seem to appear half as much worried as Mrs. Ruggles was. She could scarcely talk about the dreadful affair without breaking down.

Being regarded as the head of the servants in the house, they all came to her for confirmation of the many rumors advanced and spread. She steadfastly refused to countenance the idea that her beloved master had anything to do with the murder.

Mechanically she went about her work, her thoughts always on her employer. It was almost noon when Mr. Talbot awoke.

When Mrs. Ruggles came to his room for instructions, she found him seated at his desk reading a letter.

"It is all the same to me when we eat," he answered her question. "I am not hungry."

Mrs. Ruggles lingered at the door. Had she not better tell him? It would be better than for him to learn it from strangers.

"Have you heard about the accident, Mr. Talbot?" she said.

"What's that you say — an accident?" he asked with scant attention.

"Yes, certainly — Mr. Hawkins was found dead near the Crawford estate this morning," she replied. "They say he was shot!"

For a moment Tallbot sat as if dumbfounded, as if dazed by the news. Then he sprang up.

"Heavens! Is it possible?" he cried. "Are you sure—who told you?"

"Yes, Mr. Talbot, Warner told me when he came

from the village—and they found the gun in the bushes near the body."

Victor's countenance reflected his great agitation. With his hands behind him he paced up and down the room. His angry encounter with Hawkins last evening came vividly to his mind.

Fate had settled their quarrel; how quickly death can forestall human plans! All anger left Talbot's deep-feeling, noble heart.

The sudden sad ending of Roger Hawkins in the spring of his life, filled him with pity. What a blow—what a terrible blow for his old mother who lost in him her only child!

But once, did the thought run through his mind; "your rival is gone and Mrs. Crawford cannot threaten poor Lillian with him any more. Her plans have run into the sand."

Quickly, as if ashamed of the thought, he cast it from him and went to work—but nothing seemed to go right. Constantly, Hawkins' wine-flushed face was before his eyes, as he had seen it on the night before.

Mrs. Ruggles had long since left him in the conviction that her master did not know anything of the murder until she had told him, for no guilty man could look and act as he did.

In the afternoon, two men appeared at the Talbot home and asked to see Mr. Talbot. The latter was about to leave. With some surprise he regarded the two, who were unknown to him.

A slight perplexity showed in his face when the men introduced themselves as police officials, and he grew restless when they began to speak of the murder.

"Mr. Talbot," said one, who seemed to be the senior officer, "I must ask you to answer certain questions which I will put to you, openly and without evasions. Is

it not true that last evening you had words with Mr. Hawkins at a social affair at Mrs. Crawford's?"

"Yes," admitted Victor seemingly calm, but his agitation was increasing; he was oppressed by a presentiment of coming misfortune. "Mr. Hawkins seemed to be looking for trouble with me."

The officer nodded as if he were already aware of all this.

"In other words, you threatened him," he interrogated.

"Not exactly. I intended to give him time to reason and apologize."

"When did you leave the Crawford house?"

"It was about twelve o'clock. Hawkins' trouble with me put me out of humor and I wanted to be alone."

"Where did you go?"

Some confusion showed in Talbot's face.

"Whenever anything occurs that disturbs my mental equilibrium, I am in the habit of taking a long walk in the open air until I have recovered, and that is what I did last night. I walked home slowly through the woods in thought."

"All night?"

"Yes, all night. I only got home this morning, dead tired, but my mind was at peace. But excuse me, gentlemen, I do not understand what all this has to do with the murder of Mr. Hawkins——"

"I am not yet through with my questions," interrupted the senior officer. Fixing his inquisitorial gaze on the subject of his questions, he added:

"Since your return home, have you missed a gun?"

Victor stared at him surprised.

"A gun? Why do you ask such a question? I have not used a gun to-day and therefore have had no

occasion to look at the gun-rack."

With these words, he rose hastily and went to the rack. The two officers followed him.

The key was in the lock and as Victor opened the door, the officers and he peered together into the interior of the rack.

There was an empty place, the second socket in the row!

Unconsciously a low exclamation escaped the three men.

"Now, Mr. Talbot, where is the gun that is missing here?" demanded the officer.

Talbot stood speechless and stared vacantly at the empty socket in the rack. Who could have taken the rifle out?

He had never been in the habit of locking it for, with the exception of Mrs. Ruggles, no one was allowed to enter his private rooms.

That Mrs. Ruggles could have removed the gun was too absurd to consider for a moment. Without answering the officer, he went to the door and called for Warner.

"Have you taken a gun from this rack?" abruptly asked Mr. Talbot, as the man entered.

Warner looked sheepishly at the two strangers. Things did not look just right to him.

"No sir. How would I take one of your guns without your allowing it, sir?" he answered positively. "I wouldn't think of it, sir."

"It would not have been well for you," ejaculated Victor with increasing excitement. Addressing the officers, he went on:

"But how in the world could a gun disappear over night from the rack? Last evening, before I left, I replaced a gun which I had used the day before, and I am

certain that they were all there. It is therefore certain that in the meantime, during my absence, somebody has been at this cabinet."

"Do you know whether anyone was here last night?" he demanded sternly from Warner.

"No, there was no one here, Mr. Talbot."

Talbot nodded.

"Very well, you may go."

Never in his life did Warner leave a room as fast as he did now. He was entirely out of breath when he reached the kitchen.

"What'd I tell you, Mrs. Ruggles?" he cried. "They're looking at the master's guns now. Ther's one missing and nobody knows who took it. If the men upstairs ain't police officers, I'll be hanged!"

In her fright, Mrs. Ruggles dropped the casserole which she was just holding and it fell to the floor with a crash.

Pale and trembling, she sat down on one of the kitchen chairs.

She replied: "Warner, don't talk such crazy stuff. If Mr. Talbot heard you, he would throw you out of the house, and I wouldn't blame him either!"

In the other room an embarrassing space had been reached and the officers looked at each other significantly.

At last one of them stepped towards Talbot who was again at the gun-rack, staring wonderingly at the empty space.

"Have you any other guns besides those which you keep in this rack, Mr. Talbot?"

He shook his head.

"Well then, Roger Hawkins was shot with the gun which is missing from the rack!" said the officer in loud, emphatic tones.

Talbot fell back as though he had been struck by a heavy blow.

"With my gun——" he stammered, "what—shot with my gun? But that cannot be, it is quite impossible!"

That all color left his face, was very natural. The thought that he could be accused of killing Hawkins, paralyzed his mind. Hawkins shot with his gun? No, no, there was some terrible mistake.

"With your gun," affirmed the officer gravely, answering Victor's thoughts. "Your initials were engraved on the barrel, and it has been identified by half a dozen different persons as your property, Mr. Talbot. Under the circumstances, there is nothing for me to do but to take you in charge!"

With a violent motion, Talbot shook off the hand which the officer had placed on his shoulder.

"Arrest me? It is ridiculous, if it were not outrageous! Who dares accuse me of having killed Roger Hawkins? Oh, this is awful!"

The officer said very quietly:

"I understand your feelings, Mr. Talbot, but nevertheless we are obliged to do our duty. For your own sake I advise you to be resigned to the inevitable and come with us.

"In the natural course of things your innocence will be established if you had nothing to do with the matter. You will admit that I am right when you are somewhat calmer."

The thought that he was to be taken to prison like a malefactor, as a suspected murderer, froze the blood in Talbot's veins.

But his courage and presence of mind did not desert him. He thought of Lillian, and he groaned as if in pain.

What would she think, what would she say? How

would she bear this new,terrible blow?

"My God," he murmured, "why has this come upon me?" and for a moment almost overcome, he passed his hand over his eyes and forehead. Then he aroused himself, his manly face seemed hard, but composed.

"Very well," he said, "I am ready. You are right; my innocence cannot fail to come to light. Shall I order the car? We will reach the city sooner."

Receiving the officers' assent he called Warner and ordered him to bring the car.

Talbot took advantage of the few minutes, in the presence of the officers, to arrange the papers on his desk and lock them up. All of his motions evidenced the regularity and peace of mind which were his characteristics.

As the three were about to leave the room to go to the waiting automobile, the door was suddenly thrown open and Lillian Crawford came rushing in.

She was in a terrible state; her lovely face was deathly pale, her wild eyes looking twice as big in their fringe of black lashes, and her hair flying about her face in disorder.

She wore neither hat nor gloves, only a shawl hastily thrown over her shoulders.

Without noticing the two strangers, she hurried to Talbot, uttering a frightened cry, and threw herself on his breast and entwined him in her arms.

"Oh, Victor!" she gasped breathlessly, "how I have worried about you! My stepmother locked me in my room to prevent me coming to you, but at last I escaped. I had to see you or die from worry and grief.

"She said—she said—that——" she broke off becoming aware of the presence of the two strangers.

A dark glow shot into her face and shyly, like a frightened bird, she clung to her lover.

Talbot was greatly shaken; the sight of his love trembling for him, robbed him of the composure which he had maintained up to that moment.

He hugged her to his breast in helpless anguish, then he released her.

"Don't be alarmed dear," he whispered in a voice audible to her only. "I well know how you must have been tortured, but have patience Lillian, I will act, cost what it may. I will——" the words died on his lips.

Great God! he had forgotten that he was not a free man, but a prisoner. How could he do anything to shield her from Mrs. Crawford's malice and hate while he was in prsion?

Lillian, to whom his face was an open book, did not fail to notice the change in his expression.

She saw despair in his eyes: She also saw the two strange men who did not take their eyes from him.

All at once she understood.

"Victor," she cried anxiously, "for heaven's sake, what is this, what do they want? Oh, it cannot be, it must not be! They want to arrest you, but you are innocent, I know it! Merciful heaven! how can anyone think otherwise!"

A terrible despair had taken possession of her. Sobbing aloud, she clung to the man whom she loved and to whom she belonged, body and soul.

Gritting his teeth to suppress his agony, he admonished her soothingly.

"Lillian, dear, be calm, fear nothing, God is with me. An awful trial has come upon us, and we must bear it. Be faithful in your love, my darling; everything will soon be cleared up, it must! My conscience is clear and Heaven is with me."

"Mr. Talbot, we must go," said the officer.

"All right, I am coming," Talbot replied and then

turned to the girl. "Lillian, dear, I must leave you, my poor darling!"

"Victor! Oh, God in Heaven, they will take you to prison like a criminal," she cried wildly. "I cannot bear it—take me with you, Victor, what shall I do here alone! I have no one in the world but you."

Crazed with pain and anxiety, and fear for him, she lay on his shoulder in an abandon of grief.

What a torture for him to see her so and be helpless, but what could he do to calm her? With gentle firmness, he led the trembling girl to a couch.

"Lillian," he murmured, "we must resign ourselves. I will soon be free and in a short time we will be happy together."

Hot tears fell from the eyes of the poor girl. Her trials were too great; she was overpowered. Heavily her head sank down and a merciful unconsciousness stole upon her.

Once more Talbot's lips softly touched the forehead of his beloved, and then he laid her gently on the cushions. It is impossible to describe what it cost the poor fellow to leave her now.

He called Mrs. Ruggles and begged her to care for the helpless girl and take her home as soon as she had regained consciousness.

"Take good care of the house, Mrs. Ruggles," he said. "I am going away for a time and I cannot tell you just now when I shall come back. Good-bye."

"Mr. Talbot — oh God—oh God!" broke in the faithful woman.

Deeply touched, he motioned to her mutely with his hand. One more pitiful look at his beloved, and he was gone.

As the automobile rolled away, Lillian opened her eyes again. Confusedly she looked about her. She saw

Mrs. Ruggles, but not him—her Victor.

A terrible cry was wrung from her heart.

"Where is he?" she gasped.

"They took him away," replied Mrs. Ruggles, and broke into tears.

For a long time these two unhappy women sat with their arms about one another and their tears were mingled. The man they both loved was gone.

Chapter 152

A BITTER CUP

ONE OF the most bitter hours in Marie Desmond's life had come. She was about to leave once more the home that had been hers. She was again compelled to leave those so dear to her. There was a frightful struggle going on in her sorely troubled heart.

Ah, how tired she was of remaining a stranger to her own children. How her soul yearned for a caress from the man, who in the sight of Heaven was still her husband.

It cost her a tremendous effort to keep from crying out aloud in her bitter agony.

With the assistance of the faithful Annie she packed her belongings.

The latter kept on insisting that Marie should reveal her identity and proclaim to the world that she was the first Mrs. Philip Gordon.

"Please don't," the governess almost sobbed. "God knows I am tempted enough. You don't want me to create more misery, do you, dear?"

Annie said no more.

In silence they finished the task, and then Marie faced the dreaded task of bidding goodbye to her own children. She left the room and crossed the hall.

As she was about to enter the nursery, one of the servants rushed up to her.

"Mr. Gordon sent me to tell you that he must see you before you leave, Miss Desmond," the girl said. "He is in the library now, waiting for you."

For a moment the governess hesitated. She had hoped to be able to slip away without meeting Phil again face to face. She still thought it best for both of them that such a painful interview be avoided.

But she did not have the heart to refuse his last request.

"Very well," she replied to the waiting girl. "I'll come at once."

She walked downstairs with her head bowed and her heart beating way up in her throat.

Before she attempted to open the door which led into the library, she took a firm grip on herself.

Nothing betrayed the frightful turmoil in her soul except the pallor on her lovely face.

Gordon was seated at his desk in an attitude of utter dejection as the governess entered. His features brightened momentarily at sight of her.

"Ah, I am glad you came, Miss Desmond," he greeted pleasantly. "I was afraid you would leave without saying goodby to me. Won't you—won't you sit down for a moment?" he added coaxingly when she remained standing. "Here, take this chair."

Marie took the proffered seat without looking at him. For a few seconds the most painful silence prevailed.

"I—I feel that I owe you some explanation, my dear Miss Desmond," Phil spoke again. His voice was strained and Marie scarcely recognized it. "But a few days ago I believed it utterly impossible that you could ever leave my house," he went on somewhat hastily.

"We all have learned to—to love you so. However, circumstances beyond my control forced me to accede to the request of a dying man. For the sake of my domestic peace I agreed to let you go.

"For the sake of peace," he repeated hoarsely, "I

am obliged to consent to your leaving. I want you to know that I shall miss you more than I can say. And as for the children, I am afraid you will have a hard time breaking away from them as you bid them goodby."

During the lengthy moment of silence which ensued, Gordon averted his face evidently to hide the fact that he was near losing his self-control.

Little did he dream what it cost this lovely woman seated so close to him. Marie, with difficulty suppressed a sob.

It took every last vestige of strength to keep from crying out aloud. This man belonged to her in spite of the fact that another woman called him her husband.

"What—what will you say to the children?" Phil asked in a hollow voice. "Surely you won't be heartless enough to tell them the truth."

Marie shook her head.

"No," she answered. "I shall tell them that I have been called away, and that I may return. In time they will become accustomed to my absence and won't miss me any longer."

"Yes, that is best," agreed Phil dejectedly. "They will miss you terribly and——" He broke off suddenly.

She saw how he suffered and her heart beat to suffocation.

But she managed to retain her self-possession. Rising to her feet quickly, she held out her hand.

"Well, Mr. Gordon," she almost whispered. "I must say goodby to you now. I want to thank you for all you have done for me. I shall never forget the happy hours I have spent at Oak Manor. God bless you and your children."

Impetuously he seized her hand. His eyes rested piercingly upon her face. In them dwelled an expression of wonder. They also held a question. His lips opened.

"Marie!" he cried at last and stopped.

That he was fighting a tremendous battle with himself was very plain. He was on the verge of declaring his love for the governess of his two children.

But no, he must say no more. He must allow her to depart, though she took his heart with her.

"Goodby—and God be with you," he stammered. "You will never know what you have been to my children and—and me."

Hastily Marie withdrew her hand. She felt it was high time for her to go. In the twinkling of an eye, she had closed the door behind her.

He still stood immovable, and looked where she had gone. A grim pain contracted his breast and throat.

Now that she was really gone, he felt how violent was his passion for her, and with this passionate love for her in him, he was condemned to live with the other, whom he could not even respect.

How was he to bear this life? How utterly insane he must have been to give that promise to the old man!

Why should he sacrifice for him and his daughter his life's happiness, and begin again the bitter farce in which he was acting a sorry role? When would it all end?

With a groan he sank again into a chair at the table and dropped his head upon his arms.

Meantime, Marie was going down the corridor. Her heart threatened to break with grief and pain. But why, if it was so hard, was she going away?

Why did she not disclose herself? Who could then have prevented her from staying with him and her children?

Her womanly pride rebelled at the thought. She could stay only if she were sure the Phil loved her. Never

would she beg for his love!

Once only had she prayed to him at his feet and had been spurned. She would not risk being humbled a second time.

She had reached the steps which led to Mr. Procter's rooms. She paused in hesitation. He was a feeble old man who had always been kind to her. Should she bid him farewell?

A frown appeared between her eyes. No, she would leave without saying good-bye to him! It was through his intervention that she was parted from her children.

Again she continued on her way to the little ones. As she entered their room, Phyllis ran to her joyously.

"Oh look, Miss Desmond, see what I have drawn," she cried, holding out a paper for Marie to look at.

The latter looked down upon the sheet with unseeing eyes.

Suddenly she pressed the child to her breast passionately. Oh, how could she live without the children! As she kissed the little girl, great tears blinded her eyes.

"Why are you crying, Miss Desmond?" asked the child, frightened. "Have you a headache?"

Marie did not answer, she could have screamed in her agony. She looked for the boy. He was standing at the window, moodily looking out. A bitter pang smote her heart as she thought of the grief of the child who would pine for her. Harry saw the governess and came to her.

"Oh, Miss Desmond," he sighed, "how queer I feel! I was just thinking the spring time will soon be here, and there will be flowers and birds. If Grandpa dies, he won't see all that, will he?"

Marie sobbed aloud. Her feelings burst the bonds of all restraint. Her heart was breaking.

"What is the matter, Miss Desmond?" With big, anxious eyes, the boy looked up at her. "What is the matter?" he repeated. "Grandpa is not——"

"No, Harry, your Grandpa is no worse, but—but I have received a message and must go away, but—but I will soon come back my child——" Confused, she paused, and she noticed the change in the boy's features.

While Phyllis gave a little cry and clung to her, Harry stared at her as if too pained to move.

"Oh, must you go and will you come back, sure?" he wailed.

Was that the voice of her boy? Marie quivered. She could not bear the look of the big, searching, childish eyes.

"Yes, I will come back," she nodded, unable to meet his look. Impetuously she clasped the boy to her heart, kissed him wildly and stammered:

"Will you be good, darling, and not grieve for me while I am away? I will come again——" the falsehood choked her utterance.

She did not dare to look at the child. Phyllis began to cry bitterly. Harry acted differently. A slight shudder ran through his delicate frame and his set face betokened a mute but deep grief.

"Mamma is here again," he said softly, "and when you are gone, then——" the little fellow gulped down a lump in his throat, he could not manage to say what was on his mind.

Marie's cup of grief was full—brimming over—she must go or surrender to her emotions.

"You must not worry about that, sweet boy," she said, her voice near breaking. "Annie is going to stay with you and Phyllis. She will love you and be kind to you and your sister just as I did."

She pressed both of the children to her wildly beat-

ing bosom, then released them and fled from the room.

Little Phyllis was sobbing convulsively, while her brother, apparently in a daze, remained quiet.

Annie, who came in a moment later, quickly took the place of the departed governess, and she succeeded, at least to some extent, to fill the vacancy.

Her eyes streaming with tears, Marie made the last trip to her room. Her most bitter task was over. Utterly overcome with emotion, she tottered to a chair.

"God help me," she prayed, clenching and unclenching her hands. "Help me to remain firm. If I weaken now, all is lost indeed."

Somewhat calm, she finally rose and put on her hat. While standing before the mirror the door opened and the old housekeeper entered. The woman, greatly agitated, at once ran to Marie's side.

"I—I just found out that you are leaving, Miss Desmond," she cried. "But I refused to believe it. Tell me, is it true?"

Marie turned and looked at the loyal old woman. Ever since she came to Oak Manor they had been the best of friends. It was no means an easy matter to confirm a painful fact.

"Yes, I am going, Mrs. Jennings," she answered.

"But why?" the housekeeper demanded. "Is it because Mrs. Gordon came back?"

"Exactly, my dear friend," replied the governess, forcing a pitiful smile. "You know that Mrs. Gordon and I never were good friends. There isn't room for both of us under the same roof. I am leaving to avoid further trouble."

Mrs. Jennings wagged her gray head. Her hands were folded across her ample bosom.

"I would not let that woman drive me out," she said angrily. "You know what will happen if you leave.

She has no use for the children and she'll treat them meaner than she did before you came. You must stay for their sake."

"Annie will look after them, dear Mrs. Jennings."

"But what will become of me?" the latter wept. "That woman never liked me because I backed you up always in everything you did. She'll discharge me, and where will I find another position?"

Marie took the old woman in her arms and kissed her.

"Don't worry about that," she soothed. "Mrs. Gordon can not discharge you unless she has a good reason. Phil would not stand for it. I know him better than you suspect. As for my children——" She stopped, deathly pale.

"You—your children?" Mrs. Jennings stared at the speaker in boundless amazement.

"That was a mistake," Marie returned quickly. "I should have said 'Mr. Gordon's children.' Annie is taking my place with them, and I am very glad, for she is a kind-hearted girl who loves little ones."

Older women are always more susceptible to suspicion. And once they get an idea they don't let go of it so easy.

Mrs. Jennings had loved the first Mrs. Gordon dearly. And she could never understand why she had been drawn toward this Miss Desmond.

She had often remarked about the peculiar resemblance between the two. But never, for a moment, had she believed that the lovely governess and Marie Gordon were the same woman.

But when this Miss Desmond referred to Mr. Gordon as "Phil", and referred to little Harry and Phyllis as "her children", the scales suddenly dropped from her eyes.

Innumerable incidents of the recent past rush back to her mind clothed in a new meaning.

Only a real mother could have cared for the two Gordon children as the governess had done.

"Goodby, dear friend," Marie was saying, her hand extended.

Mrs. Jennings took the dainty gloved hand, and she looked deep into the eyes meeting hers. What confirmation she lacked she found there. She became so excited that she forgot to reply.

Marie was puzzled and a little perplexed to see the old woman leave the room in such haste.

Not for a moment did she surmise whither Mrs. Jennings was bound. With slow deliberation she walked downstairs to the automobile that was to take her to the railroad station.

Precisely the same moment the car started off, the housekeeper burst into the library and confronted the master of the house.

"Mr. Gordon—Mr. Gordon!" she gasped, out of breath. "We have made a mistake. We have been blind —all of us."

Phil glanced at the woman curiously.

"Why, what is wrong, Mrs. Jennings?" he inquired kindly.

"This Miss Desmond—the governess," came back in broken gasps, "she is—she is Marie, your first wife!"

Chapter 153

A GIRL'S FAITH

THE ARREST of Victor Talbot had created a sensation among his friends. While everyone of them believed that he was innocent, yet, they were forced to admit that circumstantial evidence pointed the finger of guilt at him. So far as was known he was the only enemy Roger Hawkins ahd in the neighborhood.

The two officers who took him in charge both knew Talbot personally, and they did their duty with reluctance.

Their stern exterior was merely a cloak to hide the sympathy within them.

At the Crawford home the domestic atmosphere was considerably disturbed. Mrs. Crawford's anger had been thoroughly aroused when she went to her stepdaughter's room and found her gone.

"Where is Lillian?" she shrieked at the servant who had been ordered to keep the girl locked in her room.

"Why—why, she ought to be here," the girl stammered confusedly.

"But she is gone," the mistress of the house cried, her wrath rising. "She could not have gotten away had you kept the door locked as I told you."

The maid did not know what to say. Every nook and corner in the house was searched, but no trace of Lillian was found.

"I—I am very sorry," she began. "I hope——"

"That is all very well," interrupted Mrs. Craw-

ford harshly the excuse of the girl. "I cannot have unreliable people in my employ. You had better get a new position just as soon as possible."

With these words the proud woman rustled by, while the poor girl began to cry bitterly.

Mrs. Crawford went to the stairs to go down when she became aware of weary, dragging steps below.

Who could it be? Leaning over the balustrade, she was barely able to repress a cry.

It was Lillian ascending, step by step.

For a moment, Mrs. Crawford stood motionless with astonishment. Without a doubt, Lillian had been to the Talbot home and spoken to Talbot, but—why had she returned home so quickly?

As Lillian came closer and raised her face, Mrs. Crawford could see what a change had taken place in her.

She looked as if she had just gotten up from a long illness. The eyes were deeply sunk and her face was colorless and drawn in pain.

Lillian did not notice her step-mother at all. Her glance passed her as if she saw nothing. It was only when she met her at the landing that she recognized her and on doing so, she fell back a step in trembling.

"Why did you leave your room against my orders?" demanded Mrs. Crawford of the unhappy girl.

No answer. Her eyes stared without expression into vacancy. An unnamed dread took possession of the other.

There was something strange and unnatural in Lillian's manner which filled her with terror.

"Speak! Where have you been?" the older woman cried.

Lillian moved her lips but was unable to speak coherently. A few unintelligible syllables were all that

Mrs. Crawford heard.

Two big tears started from the girl's eyes. She was a picture of mute and helpless misery.

Mrs. Crawford mistook it for obstinacy. This was in harmony with all of Lillian's actions. She could never get any satisfaction from her.

"Come to your room!" she commanded sharply, "perhaps you will consent to answer me there."

Lillian's pale lips did not move.

Mechanically she followed her step-mother. In her room, she huddled herself in a chair and buried her face in her hands.

Mrs. Crawford's glittering eyes sought to penetrate the poor girl. Something extraordinary must have taken place to bring her into this condition—but what?

Suddenly her eyes sparkled diabolically. Had the lovers had a quarrel and parted? How fortunate that would be! Then she could lay her snares for Talbot and then he would probably not be so indifferent to her, if from nothing else than spite towards Lillian.

The thought caused her heart to beat more quickly; she was anxious for certainty.

"Answer me! Where have you been? At Talbot's?" she cross-examined the girl.

Mrs. Crawford bit her lips impatiently. Why did Lillian not speak? Was she seeking to hide her trouble with her lover?

"What did you want there?" she continued angrily. "Have you no feeling of pride or honor to prevent you from running after that man? You do not seem to realize how foolish and cheap you are becoming. I am ashamed of you."

Suddenly Lillian aroused herself. Her delicate frame actually seemed to wax in stature, and fearlessly she met her step-mother's hateful, glowing eyes.

"I just had to go to him," she answered simply, "to tell him that I did not believe in his guilt. In such an hour, my place is at his side for I belong to him, and God brought me to him at the right time, for in another half hour I would not have seen him any more for—they have arrested him!"

Mrs. Crawford was not prepared for that. In mortal terror she retreated.

The high color from her face vanished and a deathly pallor took its place. Her presence of mind deserted her to such an extent that she did not even think of hiding her trouble from Lillian.

"Arrested?" she murmured and let herself down heavily into a chair.

How was it possible? Had the suspicion which she had thoughtlessly uttered in the morning, so quickly found confirmation? It could not be otherwise; the authorities must have binding evidence in their hands to proceed so quickly against a man of Talbot's position in the community.

She shuddered with terror. Could Talbot, after all, have killed Roger Hawkins? But why not? Victor Talbot was a hot-tempered, sensitive man.

Who could know what had taken place in the woods between the men before the catastrophe—an encounter like in the dining room, but far more bitter and violent!

Filled with jealousy, and perhaps irritated by the other, it was not unlikely that Talbot had forgotten himself. It was not unnatural!

Never had she realized how much her heart went out towards Talbot as in this moment, when she knew he was in prison.

With joy she would have thrown away her position and her wealth for him in exchange for his love for

which her heart thirsted.

Her whole soul longed for the joys and pleasures of a kind of existence which she had not tasted during her marriage of convenience.

Her eyes fell on Lillian who had seated herself again and closed her eyes.

Both grieved for the same man, but their common sorrows brought them no nearer to each other. Perhaps—so thought Mrs. Crawford—it was by the hand of fate itself that this had happened.

In the end, she might succeed in parting the two from each other. In cold tones she spoke again to the heart-broken girl.

"So you see, my surmise was correct! Mr. Talbot has not been arrested without reason. Doubtless they can prove that he murdered Mr. Hawkins."

"No, no—never, never! He is not guilty of the crime. I have faith in him even if the whole world condemns him," cried Lillian hotly. "How glad I am that I could tell him so before he was taken away.

"Now he knows that I will be true to him in his misfortune. He will have this comfort at least with him in prison and it will help him to more lightly bear the trouble he is in."

Although a mere girl in years, Lillian had waked to the consciousness of emotions which belong to womanhood.

She knew that true love did not doubt, and that she, in her great love for Victor, could and would defend him with her life, like a lioness with her cubs in danger.

At her outburst, Mrs. Crawford stared at the young girl in wonder. She was no longer the child whom she had thought to control and rule.

Love and misfortune had ripened Lillian into a woman—a woman resolved to fight to the last for her

love! How she hated this girl who blocked her path to happiness!

"Mr. Talbot's arrest will prevent you from any impudence for the present," she said harshly. "And I think that you will shortly be more reasonable and realize that no girl of Crawford blood can become the wife of a man who not only stands greatly below her in society, but who is suspected of the crime of murder besides.

"The future will show whether he is guilty or not, but under any and all circumstances, he is not for you!"

Erectly and with undaunted resolution, Lillian stood before her stepmother.

Not a muscle in her face moved — only her eyes glowed with supernatural fire.

"When he is released, I will go to him," she declared firmly. "And if he must die innocently, I will not survive him!" Sobs suffocated the poor child's voice.

Mrs. Crawford turned from her, shrugging her shoulders.

"You must be insane," she said with a forced and scornful laugh. "In your state of mind, nothing would suit you better than to die with your hero at the stake.

"Well, we shall see what will happen! I forbid you any communication with Mr. Talbot either by writing or otherwise.

"Your name will be dragged into this horrible affair anyway, and you must not create more talk by your eccentric conduct. You are nothing but an unreasoning child, and I must watch you."

With another hateful look at Lillian, she left her alone.

With a sad, desolute expression, Lillian gazed after her stepmother.

"She has no heart, no feeling. Oh, father, how

could you think to give me a mother in her?" she cried plaintively.

In her own room, Mrs. Crawford indulged in private expression of her feelings. The moment of parting in which Lillian had assured Talbot on his arrest, of her unswerving love and faith, she knew had only more firmly knitted the two together?

She shuddered. Would Talbot be able to extricate himself, or would he be condemned and executed? Her lips formed into a hard, cruel line.

She could wish him dead, rather, than happy with Lillian.

In feverish attention she daily devoured the papers which contained reports of him.

It was from them, that she learned that Victor Talbot had been unable to satisfactorily account for the time he had spent on the night of the murder—in short, to prove an alibi.

Moreover, his gun had been found not far from the dead man. His encounter with him on the evening before — all these circumstances, in public opinion, pointed to his guilt.

The sad affair daily filled columns in the newspapers, Talbot's entire life, his origin and the persistence with which, without any help but his own powers, he had made his own way in life, was daily discussed.

Lillian Crawford was often named in these articles. In spite of all that could be done, it could not be concealed that she had been the object of enmity and feeling between the two men, and that it was for her sake that Talbot, in a jealous rage, must have killed the other.

Nor was Mrs. Crawford left out of the papers and gossip. Her beauty and grace were described and she was placed in a very favorable light.

She, the guardian of the young girl, had warned

her against and attempted to break off any relation with Talbot first, because they were not equals in society and second, because she, the far-seeing woman, had recognized Talbot's true character and knew that it would not insure a happy life for her stepdaughter.

Mrs. Crawford took good care that these papers should reach Lillian and she gloated with cruel satisfaction at the tortures which these articles prepared for the poor child.

She saw her but seldom, only at the table, and then there were always servants in the room. They had nothing to say to each other.

Lillian always breathed more freely when the older woman was out of her sight. She longed to have a single soul to whom she could pour out some of her troubles that filled her heart to overflowing.

After all, she could not write, for her letters would be opened and read by others before they could reach him.

Sometimes in the evenings, when no one saw her, she stole over to Victor's home. It was some satisfaction to be in the house which was his favorite haunt.

Chapter 154

PHIL'S RESOLUTION

PHILIP GORDON found himself in a frightful quandary after the sudden departure of the governess. The words uttered by Mrs. Jennings, the old housekeeper, were constantly ringing in his ears. For over an hour he paced up and down in the library, trying to arrive at some sort of a conclusion.

Somehow he could not bring himself to believe that this beautiful Miss Desmond was in reality Marie, his first wife.

But the more he pondered over the matter, the more he became convinced of his utter blindness.

He pieced the various little incidents together. He recalled Miss Desmond's eyes, her walk and all-too familiar mannerisms. Only a natural mother could have given his children such love and devotion.

He was reminded of her strange conduct in his presence. This and numerous other things seemed to convince him of his gigantic stupidity.

No wonder the detective agency had been unable to locate his first wife when she was living under his own roof under an assumed name.

All day Phil remained in seclusion. He neglected the duty of a host to Betty Harding.

He forgot to inquire after his father-in-law's health. The only other person to be considered was his wife, and Alice counted for little in his life now.

He felt that he could not bear to look at her in spite of the fact that she had returned to Oak Manor re-

pentant.

His imagination was running wild. It was almost too good to be true that this exquisite Miss Desmond could be his first wife. And he did no longer reproach himself for having fallen in love with her.

Toward evening Dr. Van Buren called to wait on old Mr. Procter. Of course, the physician asked to see Phil, and the latter received him.

The moment these two men stood face to face and their eyes met, the message was flashed. Dr. Van Buren had always had his suspicions about the governess. Gordon's obvious excitement betrayed what took place.

"So you found out the truth," said the doctor.

"I did," admitted Phil with a groan. "But I learned it too late. I left her get away without——"

"Who put you wise?' Dr. Van Buren interrupted.

Gordon repeated Mrs. Jennings' words, and for quite a while they discussed what to do next.

"Of course, you are going after her," the physician suggested.

"I am," the other declared. "I won't have any peace of mind until I find her. There is still a reasonable doubt that we are all mistaken, and I will not know until Marie and I again stand face to face."

Dr. Van Buren glanced at the speaker.

"Wouldn't it be rather embarrassing to — to the present Mrs. Gordon?" he asked.

"It is bound to be that," Phil exclaimed impatiently. "But my first duty is to the woman I wronged so terribly. I drove her fro mmy house believing her guilty. For what happened after that I am also to blame.

"Alice did her best to make me the most miserable man in all the world. The marriage between us must be dissolved as soon as Marie is found."

A long space of silence fell. Gordon sank into a

chair and covered his face with his hands. Dr. Van Buren felt sincerely sorry for him.

"You can't afford to break down now, Phil," he said, real smypathy in his voice. "You'll have to buck up and meet the situation. Try to get some rest and a few hours sleep. And above all things, don't worry. We will find her to-morrow, old man."

In boundless gratitude Gordon held out his hand.

"Thanks," he said rather huskily. "I knew I could depend on you, my dear friend."

After a confidential chat which lasted for over two hours, Dr. Van Buren left Oak Manor. Gordon went to his father-in-law's room where he found Betty. The young Mrs. Harding was deliriously happy at the prospect of being reunited with her husband the next day.

"Father has sent for him, and he is coming to-morrow," she cried.

"I am glad for your sake, Betty," Phil said. "But I am sorry that I will not be present to witness Bob's return. I have to leave on a very important mission. However, remember me to Bob and my best wishes are yours."

Old John Procter glanced sharply at the speaker.

"How long will you be gone, my boy?" he inquired.

"That I can not say right now, dad," came back. "And I hate to go away right now for you are far from being a well man."

"I am improving fine," the old gentleman declared. "Betty here is going to be my nurse."

"That's fine. That's fine," Gordon moved toward the door.

Just as he was about to open it and pass out, his wife came in.

Continued in next number

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